Spring 1-1-2012

Phamaly and the DisAbility Project: Models of Theater by Disabaled Performers

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PHAMALY AND THE DISABILITY PROJECT:
MODELS OF THEATER BY DISABLED PERFORMERS

by

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B.F.A., Creighton University, 2002

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A thesis submitted to the

Faculty of the Graduate School of the

University of Colorado in partial fulfillment

of the requirement for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of Theatre and Dance

2012

This thesis entitled:
Phamaly and the DisAbility Project: Models of Theater by Disabaled Performers
written by Jason Bogaard Dorwart
has been approved for the Department of Theatre and Dance

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Beth Osnes, Ph.D.

Date 7/16/2012

The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we
Find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards
Of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.

IRB protocol # 12-0109

Dorwart, Jason Bogaard (M.A., Theatre and Dance)

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Thesis directed by Associate Professor Oliver Gerland

Phamaly and the DisAbility Project are theater companies providing performance opportunities to disabled people. The companies have different missions and purposes. Phamaly produces standard Broadway fare (or previously-existing material) with an all disabled cast. Their stated mission is to produce traditional theatre in non-traditional ways, empowering disabled people to star in plays and roles that traditionally would not be available to them. The DisAbility Project writes and produces new material based upon the experience of its actors. This company comprises people with and without disabilities to model inclusion, creating and touring original material in order to educate others about the culture of disability. Interviews with company leaders and performers demonstrate that Phamaly and the DisAbility Project take different approaches to performance and inclusion. I conclude that Phamaly conforms to a Brechtian model of drama and performance, while the DisAbility Project enacts Augusto Boal's theories of the theater of the oppressed.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Fran Cohen, co-founder of the DisAbility Project. Battling cancer at the end of her life, Fran still attended rehearsals for the theater company she loved and insisted that I interview her for this thesis. In my one hour with her, it was apparent that Fran insisted on a lot of things from a lot of people – and we should appreciate that she did. Fran died from cancer mere hours before this thesis was completed but was a force of nature and will live on through her desire to change the world.

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CHAPTER ONE

METHODOLOGY AND INTRODUCTION

After sustaining a spinal cord injury in August 2000, theatre for me became both a source of frustration and a means of reconnecting with the world. Through performance I had an outlet creatively and emotionally, yet I also had a constant reminder of my limitations in movement and ability to financially sustain a theatre career.

Upon graduation from Creighton University, I was offered a graduate assistantship at the University of Nebraska-Omaha. When I accepted the position, I was ecstatic as I deeply wished to make an academic career in the field. However, after one semester financial reality set in. Receiving my monthly $1,000 stipend pushed my income over Nebraska's definition of the "poverty line." This meant that had I continued in the position I would have lost my state sponsored healthcare plan, Medicaid. I knew this going in, but hoped that the matter could be resolved and that I would be able to maintain the Medicaid insurance plan by some other means. Unfortunately, the reality was that the stipend paid me too much to maintain Medicaid eligibility, but not enough to cover my disability related healthcare costs.

I conceded defeat, withdrew from the program, moved home to Denver, and took a job at a non-profit which remodeled homes for people with disabilities. I hoped that the non-profit work would satisfy my social justice predilection, and that Phamaly (Physically Handicapped Actors and Musical Artists League), a group that I had heard so much about while living in Omaha, would at least provide me with some opportunity to remain engaged in theatre. Eventually, I left the job to attend law school, but remained heavily involved with Phamaly, and eventually enrolled at the University of Colorado to study for my Master's degree in theatre.

The bi-polar activities of law and drama made me realize something important about the way that theatre can function. Theatre was the avenue that made me feel truly alive, active, and participating in the world. Yet, it also was (for my temperament) the best means for effecting change in the world, engaging those who feel like outsiders, and empowering the voiceless. My experience through Phamaly is that the company members feel emboldened through its work. But just as importantly, audience members learn about prejudice and about the potential of disabled people – all while being duped into believing they are merely watching a piece of entertainment!

When I first mentioned to others that I planned to continue my theatre education after law school, the typical response was, "Well, I guess they both are about performing?" The question mark punctuating that sentence revealed the speaker's true feelings. But for me, the intersection of law and drama cuts deeper than "performance." Both law and drama are about seeking truth, giving voice to the voiceless, and communicating with care.

Since beginning studies at CU Boulder, I have developed a performance workshop for people receiving service dogs through Colorado's Freedom Service Dogs. The workshop uses improvisation and theatre games to help new dog handlers prepare for public interaction with a dog constantly nearby. I also have twice recently been elected by Phamaly's cast members to be their liaison to the Artistic and Executive branches of the company. In the past, I served on Phamaly's Board of Directors in various capacities. I enjoyed these activities because I helped disabled people who traditionally face barriers to academic, theatrical, and social venues become a part of something larger than themselves, adding to the cultural fabric of the City of Denver. By performing onstage, disabled actors in Phamaly move beyond outsider status and get to fully participate in and drive the cultural scene around them.

However, Phamaly's model for working with disabled performers is not the only practical model. Examples of other companies include AXIS Dance of Berkeley, California, a dance company which includes performers with and without wheelchairs; Theater Breaking Through Barriers of New York City, an off-Broadway theater dedicated to advancing actors and writers with disabilities; and Graeae Theatre Company based in London, England, which tours that country with the goal of making theater accessible to all.

In this thesis, I will compare two American theater companies that both deal with disability, using two very different approaches. These two theater companies are Phamaly and That Uppity Theater Company's DisAbility Project which is located in St. Louis, Missouri.

Both Phamaly and the DisAbility Project were founded in order to provide performance opportunities for people with disabilities. However, each company has a different mission and purpose. Phamaly produces standard Broadway fare (or previously existing material) and uses an all disabled cast. Their stated mission is to produce traditional theatre in non-traditional ways, to empower disabled people to star in plays and roles which would not traditionally be available to them. The DisAbility Project writes and produces new material based upon the experience of actors in the company. This company comprises people with and without disabilities to model inclusion, and creates and tours original material as an educational tool about the culture of disability. These companies represent two different approaches to performance and inclusion. Another reason it makes sense to compare these two companies is that they are of equal longevity, both being founded in 1989.

Both approaches are needed, and this study proposes to compare them. My initial hypothesis was that the two companies illustrated different models for conceiving how disabled people fit into society at large. However, after conducting my research, I came to believe that

the theoretical models of disability were too vague to fully describe how these theater companies worked. Instead of using models of disability to describe the companies, two models of dramatic theory could better describe how the companies functioned. Ultimately, this paper will argue my perspective that Phamaly conforms to a Brechtian model of drama, while the DisAbility Project enacts Augusto Boal's theories of the theater of the oppressed.

Using the perspectives of these two models, we can see disability depicted in different ways and different approaches to the audience's expectations of disabled actors. Depictions of physical disability on stage are relatively rare, and when people with physical disabilities are portrayed often it is by able-bodied actors. These two theatre companies deliberately put physically disabled characters and actors on stage for all performances. The knowledge gained from this study is important as more companies are formed for disabled actors and as disabled actors become involved in mainstream theatre companies. This knowledge will be important for portraying disability in honest, sensitive, and realistic ways.

DATA COLLECTION

Data collection occurred in keeping with the University's Human Research guidelines. My project was approved by the IRB in April 2012. I conducted personal one-on-one interviews with the founders of the companies and with actors from the companies. Each participant was involved for no more than one hour of personal contact. In all, I interviewed six subjects in May 2012. I traveled to St. Louis, where the DisAbility Project is based, to interview cofounders Joan Lipkin and Fran Cohen, and actors Ana Jennings and Bobbie Williams. I also conducted telephone interviews with Phamaly founder Gregg Vigil and former actor Regan Linton.

To recruit these interviewees, I sent an email to leaders of the two companies, asking for

interviews and for contact information for actors who would be useful subjects. I have had previous interaction with the participants from Phamaly due to my personal involvement with the company. Each interviewee answered questions about his or her involvement with one of the theatre companies. These questions touched on duration of involvement, reasons for involvement, how the interviewee perceives he/she has benefitted from involvement, and how he/she feels about displaying his/her disability on stage for a public audience. Data collected on each participant included the person's name, the nature of his or her disability, the length of time he or she has spent with the company, and any relevant theatrical training and experience. These interviews were documented through audio recording with the consent of the participants.

DISABILITY IN THE REAL WORLD OF THEATER

Having described my process for conducting the research, I now wish to describe why disabled people feel so alienated from the theatre to the point that they are compelled to create their own specialized companies. Depictions of physical disability on stage are relatively rare, and when people with physical disabilities are portrayed often it is by able-bodied actors. These two theatre companies deliberately put physically disabled characters and actors on stage for all performances. The knowledge gained from this study is important as more companies are formed for disabled actors and as disabled actors become involved in mainstream theatre companies. This knowledge will be important for portraying disability in honest, sensitive, and realistic ways. Theatre involving disabled actors is starting to emerge in the cultural mainstream as evidenced by Phamaly's summer performances in the downtown Denver Performing Arts Complex.

For much of theatre history, disability onstage has served a purpose other than being

merely one trait of a fully realized character. "Individual characters become metaphors that signify 'social and individual collapse,'" according to Carrie Sandahl and Philip Auslander in the introduction to their book *Bodies in Commotion: Disability and Performance* (Sandahl 2005 3). They go on to describe various manifestations of this metaphor:

> Typical disabled characters are a familiar cast: the "obsessive avenger," who seeks revenge against those he considers responsible for his disablement; the "sweet innocent" (otherwise known as the "Tiny Tim"), who acts as a moral barometer of the nondisabled; the "comic misadventurer," whose impairments initiate physical comedy or whose body becomes the target for comic violence; the "inspirational overcomer," the extraordinary individual who excels despite her impairments; the "charity case," who elicits pity and allows others to mark themselves as nondisabled by bestowing goodwill; the "freak," the ultimate outsider; and the "monster," whose disfigurements arouse fear and horror (Sandahl 2005 3).

In a production put on by a company of disabled actors, where all or many of the stage figures have some form of disability, these metaphors lose traction. Disability stops being a metaphor and simply becomes a part of the world of the play. This study will bring attention to the work of two theatre companies that make disability part of the world of the play. It will explain how and why such companies are formed, and how their different performance styles affect audience perceptions of and expectations about disabled people.

It is not just onstage that disabled people stand out – they do so in any crowded space. Wheelchairs aren't just for people who can't stand up, they are also for people who inevitably stand out. Silly wordplay aside, I recently had a situation where my own wheelchair made me stand out in a way that greatly angered me. I was attending a play in Denver at a theater that had

been remodeled less than 10 years earlier. The seating for wheelchairs was in the front row, off to house right, with a large bank of seats rising up behind. One might think that with a recently redesigned theater space the wheelchair seating would be more accommodating, better integrated, and less obtrusive than it was. However, because of the way that the theater was designed, my head was at about the same level as the people two and three rows behind me.

Now, I am not a small person; I am 6'3" tall and a wheelchair that accommodates me and my legs necessarily rides very high off the ground. Plus, during this episode at the theater, I was in an electric wheelchair, meaning that I took up more space than I would have had I been in a manual wheelchair. None of this is really my fault, or anybody's fault for that matter. I was merely trying to attend a theater performance in the space provided to me in the built environment. Nonetheless, I heard unnecessarily rude comments, sighs of exasperation, and complaints from those sitting behind me whose views were blocked by my presence in a wheelchair. People moved to chairs on either side for a more unobstructed view, causing a smattering of empty seats rising up three rows behind me.

WAYS OF CONCEIVING DISABILITY

This occurrence caused me to start thinking about the nature of disability. Several definitions of what disability is and how it can be described have been proposed by scholars since the disability rights movement began. In the following pages I will describe and define these different theories, but before doing so I would like to explain why this theater-going incident angered me. One might conclude that what happened to me in the auditorium was emblematic of the "disability" or "social" model of disability, which sees disability as the result of dominant social structures, in this case, an architectural environment. However, my

experience demonstrated to me that the archaic "moral model of disability," wherein disability refers to a moral shortcoming of the disabled person, still drives some of the public's thoughts about disability. While I felt that my inability to blend into the audience was due to an architectural shortcoming, other patrons expressed opinions about my moral value because I was obstructing their view. I began to wonder where one way of conceiving disability ends and another begins.

My fellow audience members' comments devalued me as a human being because of my reprehensible act of sitting in the seat provided to me. The comments implied that somehow I was a terrible person for blocking their view, imposing my disability upon them, and essentially infringing upon their right to exist in the world without obstruction from others. These people treated the situation as if it were somehow my fault and an indicator of my lack of moral worth.

The purpose of this anecdote is to demonstrate that the following theories on disability are not entirely distinct and immutable. The following descriptions are taken from an online essay called "The Definition of Disability" by Director of the World Institute on Disability Deborah Kaplan, in which she summarizes the theories more effectively than I could hope to improve upon. She describes the "moral model of disability" as:

> historically the oldest and [one] less prevalent today. However, there are many cultures that associate disability with sin and shame, and disability is often associated with feelings of guilt. For the individual with a disability, this model is particularly burdensome. Families have hidden away the disabled family member, keeping them out of school and excluded from any chance at having a meaningful role in society. Even in less extreme circumstances, this model has resulted in general social ostracism and self-hatred.

Newer than this is the “medical model” which arose

> as "modern" medicine began to develop in the 19th Century, along with the enhanced role of the physician in society. Since many disabilities have medical origins, people with disabilities were expected to benefit from coming under the direction of the medical profession. Under this model, the problems that are associated with disability are deemed to reside within the individual. In other words, if the individual is "cured" then these problems will not exist. Society has no underlying responsibility to make a "place" for persons with disabilities, since they live in an outsider role waiting to be cured.

The notions behind the medical model began to develop with an eye toward therapy, leading to the “rehabilitation model**”** which regards

> the person with a disability as in need of services from a rehabilitation professional who can provide training, therapy, counseling or other services to make up for the deficiency caused by the disability. Historically, it gained acceptance after World War II when many disabled veterans needed to be re-introduced into society. Persons with disabilities have been very critical of both the medical model and the rehabilitation model. While medical intervention can be required by the individual at times, it is naive and simplistic to regard the medical system as the appropriate locus for disability related policy matters. Many disabilities and chronic medical conditions will never be cured. Persons with disabilities are quite capable of participating in society, and the practices of confinement and institutionalization that accompany the sick role are simply not acceptable.

The newest model that Kaplan describes is the “disability model,” sometimes referred to as the “social model.” The disability model

> recognizes social discrimination as the most significant problem experienced by persons

with disabilities and as the cause of many of the problems that are regarded as intrinsic to the disability under the other models. This model regards disability as a normal aspect of life, not as a deviance and rejects the notion that persons with disabilities are in some inherent way "defective." Most people will experience some form of disability, either permanent or temporary, over the course of their lives. Given this reality, if disability were more commonly recognized and expected in the way that we design our environments or our systems, it would not seem so abnormal.

There is crossover between these different ways of conceiving disability. Ideas which most of us would view as patently absurd (moral model) still find traction in many people's minds. How then do we define "person with a disability"? This question is knotted up with more questions about how persons with disabilities perceive themselves and how they are perceived by others. It is no accident that these questions are emerging at the same time that the status of persons with disabilities is changing dramatically. Both Phamaly and the DisAbility Project are redefining notions of disability and how the able bodied world interacts with those who have disabilities.

CHAPTER ORGANIZATION

When first beginning this study, I attempted to think of the theater companies in terms of their relation to these models of disability. However, as I hope the anecdote about me watching a theatrical performance demonstrates, the lines between these theories are rather blurry. Each theory is like a pillar that supports some part of the overarching way in which disabled people experience the world and are experienced by others. Instead of defining the two companies in terms of disability theory, I began to see that they approached disability experience through

different dramatic forms, one Brechtian and the other based in Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed. These two companies do not necessarily ground their productions in the works of these two theorists. I am merely looking at how these models are effective means of describing their work from an objective point of view.

In a Phamaly production, there are moments when the performers' disabilities (whether intentionally or incidentally) add value to the audience's experience through a form of what Bertolt Brecht called the "alienation effect." As described by Brecht, the alienation effect works in opposition to traditional notions of empathy with characters and immersion in a theatricalized story. Brecht wished to distance his audience from his characters so that his audience could intellectualize the reasons for their activities instead of uncritically accepting them. To achieve such distancing, Brecht called for what he described as the alienation effect "which prevents the audience from losing itself passively and completely in the character created by the actor, and which consequently leads the audience to be a consciously critical observer" (Brecht 1957 91). To produce this effect, the actor must "discard whatever means he has learnt of getting the audience to identify itself with the characters which he plays" (Brecht 1957 193). Brecht identifies certain techniques that can assist the actor in this endeavor such as breaking the fourth wall, direct address to the audience, or an actor commenting on the action of the play. In a Phamaly production, the act of putting disabled actors onstage in roles traditionally played by able bodied actors alienates the audience.

The DisAbility Project approaches theater in a different way. The company writes all of its own material, dealing intentionally and directly with the experience of disabled people. The company performs with the outright aim of involving the audience. The interaction between DisAbility Project actors and audience can come through shared performance exercises, post-

show question and answer sessions, and direct address during shows designed to elicit the opinions of the spectators. This method of performance relates directly to the theater of the oppressed, a theatrical form described by Brazilian director Augusto Boal in the 1970s. Boal's techniques use theater as a means of promoting social and political change. The goal of the theater of the oppressed is to activate the audience so that they explore, show, analyze and transform the reality in which they are living. "The theater of the oppressed is located precisely on the frontier between fiction and reality — and this border must be crossed. If the show starts in fiction, its objective is to become integrated into reality, into life. Let us be democratic and ask our audiences to tell us their desires, and let us show them alternatives" (Boal 2002 247). The DisAbility Project uses the real experiences of its actors to create fictional situations which the audience is asked to comment upon.

The remainder of this paper will acquaint the reader with each of these theater companies -- their histories, missions, organizational structures, production styles, and participants. Chapter Two will introduce the reader to Phamaly. Chapter Three will do the same for the DisAbility Project. Lastly, Chapter Four will examine how each of these companies explores disability by means of techniques associated with Brecht or Boal.

CHAPTER 2

PHAMALY

FOUNDING OF THE COMPANY

Phamaly, the Physically Handicapped Actors and Musical Artists League, is a theatre company based in Denver, Colorado, composed entirely of actors with disabilities. A group of former students of Denver's Charles Boettcher School, a K-12 school for children with special needs, grew frustrated with the lack of theatrical opportunities for disabled people, and in 1989 created a theatre company of their own ("About Phamaly" 2012). According to co-founder Gregg Vigil, "We all knew each other from school, but by the time we got together to actually form Phamaly, one of the members was no longer living in Denver, he had moved to Arizona. So, technically he wasn't one of the founders, per se, but we still consider him one of the founders, because he was one of the five of us who had discussed the idea. The names of the five founders are Terry Westerman, Kathleen Traylor, Kevin Ahl, Rick Britton, and myself."

With a small grant, this group founded Phamaly, the Physically Handicapped Amateur Musical Actors League, and in July 1990 staged a one weekend run of *Guys and Dolls* in the auditorium of their former school (*There's Still Hope for Dreams* 2009). Since that time, the company has rebranded as the Physically Handicapped Actors and Musical Artists League and currently performs 4-5 shows each year at a variety of venues in the Denver Metropolitan area: the Denver Performing Arts Complex, the Aurora Fox Theatre, and the Arvada Center for the Arts and Humanities, among others. Phamaly's mission is to produce traditional theatre in nontraditional ways (i.e. with disabled performers), not necessarily to produce theatre about disability.

The growth from small start-up theater company to the large group that Phamaly is today took years of struggle beginning with school theatre productions. The Boettcher School, which has since closed, was part of the Denver Public Schools system and was built to educate all varieties of disabled students in the days before mainstreaming. The students who founded Phamaly had been introduced to theatre and dance while still in school and had been bitten by the bug. "Oh yes," says Vigil, "I had performed in high school. I had been in five shows from middle school through high school. The first show being *Oliver* and I played the Artful Dodger, and I knew from that moment on that this is what I wanted to do" (Vigil interview 2012).

Unfortunately, upon graduation, they discovered that opportunities for disabled people to be onstage in the theatre were severely limited. This limitation came from various sources; lack of opportunity, lack of training, and family pressure all played a role. "No, after I graduated from high school I didn't audition elsewhere," says Vigil.

Co-founder Kathleen Traylor concurs on the difficulty of just getting a foot in the door. "I would go into an audition in my wheelchair, and the director would look at me funny. They can get a 3,000 pound elephant on stage, but god forbid they figure out how to get a wheelchair up there" (*There's Still Hope for Dreams* 2009).

Vigil had an opportunity to study acting at a local community college but his parents would not allow it. One day during his final year of high school in 1976, Vigil says he

> came home all excited because our teacher from school introduced me to a professor from the community college North campus. He came and saw one of our productions, in fact he saw *South Pacific*; I played Emile DeBeque in that show. Afterwards he came up to me and begged me to study with him, and I was just beside myself. I never dreamed that somebody would ask me, and I wanted to, I really did. So, I went home that night

> and I remember talking to my parents and telling them what had happened, and both of them said that there was no way they were going to pay for my college if I was going to study theater because there was no opportunities for people with disabilities and I would be wasting my time. I abandoned the idea of going to college altogether at that point. It was my only way of rebelling, it was! Because I needed to rebel against them, because this is all a really wanted to do and if they weren't going to support it I wasn't going to go to college. And basically they told me that if I didn't go to college I had to go to work, and so I did. (Vigil interview 2012)

Years later, in the mid 1980's, the group of friends were still in contact and interested in performing. "We actually incorporated Phamaly in 1989," says Vigil, "It was about two or three years prior to that the idea first came into being, but we had to put it on hold because none of us knew how to start a nonprofit organization, we didn't know how to start a theater company, we didn't know anything, it was just an idea. So we had to put it on the back burner" (Vigil interview 2012).

After high school and before Phamaly, Westerman, Traylor, and Vigil joined a theatre and therapy program in Denver as a continued outlet for their creative energies. A member of the group

> had seen an article about this theater/therapy program that was taking place over off of Sixth Avenue and Galapago. I really don't remember the name of the group, it was so long ago. We all decided that we wanted to try it out, we had no idea what it was and we weren't really looking for the therapy part of it, but it definitely sounded like something we wanted to be a part of. It wasn't "Theatre" in that big sense, but we were doing some improv acting around certain issues that we might be having with our disabilities. (Vigil

interview 2012)

Later, Vigil became involved in a neighborhood housing group, and through that learned a lot about nonprofits and how to incorporate. He was able to take that information and "pull everybody back together and say let's do this, let's get this started now" (Vigil interview 2012). Their first priority was to secure a source of funding. They found another non-profit arts and disability organization which was willing to act as an umbrella organization while Phamaly was trying to get funding. "We got the VSA [Very Special Arts] involved right about the time that we were trying to fill out our very first grant application. [They] allowed us to go under their umbrella while we applied for the 501(c)(3) status" (Vigil interview 2012).

After, obtaining their own non-profit status, Phamaly began working on a grant proposal to the Colorado Council for the Arts. Vigil says that the Colorado Council for the Arts

> had this grant, and we decided that we were going to apply for it. We had help from all these people, looking over our grant proposal. People from the theater community all said the same thing, "This is a really good proposal that you are writing, but don't expect anything the first time because they don't give money to first-time organizations. But, you're doing a great job and this is exactly the way it should look." And, I mean, we worked our asses off on that grant proposal, and sent it in. (Vigil interview 2012)

Because of what others in the theater community had told them, the friends never expected a dime. But, according to Vigil, three months later, Phamaly received a letter stating that the grant had been given. The group was stunned to have their very first grant proposal accepted, but the truly stunning part came buried in the second paragraph of the letter. According to Vigil, "The second paragraph said something to the effect that the only thing they found wrong with our application is that we should have asked for more money!" They had

asked for and received $3,500. Vigil says, “$3,500 is nothing for a budget for a show. But, somehow we pulled it off with that $3,500.”

With money in hand, Phamaly had to figure out how to cobble together their show. Money was tight, time was short and bodies were in demand. Vigil wore every hat possible that first year; he worked as director, set designer, costumer, and publicist. Not only was there a shortage of production labor, but the group needed enough actors to fill out the cast. “Okay now we’ve got to do a show, and we’ve got to get enough people to do the show,” says Traylor, “We can’t do *Guys and Dolls* with five people, so we literally went out onto the streets and grabbed people with disabilities and pulled them in. Many of our actors played five or six roles, but we pulled it off” (*News Hour* 2006*).*

In spite of the difficulty of getting that first show off the ground, the group did not intend to merely produce one show and call it quits. Phamaly’s initial plan was to do one show each year, but even that was beyond the level of experience and expertise of the founders. And, while their first show was *Guys and Dolls*, this was not the show that they had planned on doing all along, even while applying for the grant. “We had originally chosen to do *A Chorus Line* as our first show”, says Vigil. The group met with people from all over Denver's theater community. When they could, they asked for advice from actors, directors, and producers, most of whom no one in the group had ever met before. According to Vigil, the one thing the group kept hearing from professional theater artists was, "You know, we really support what you're doing, but we don't think *Chorus Line* is a good show for you to start off with.” Nonetheless, nobody in Phamaly was satisfied with the reasons they were given for not doing *A Chorus Line.* Finally, they met with a director who satisfactorily explained to the group *why* the script and the company were not a good match. Vigil tells the story this way:

And then we met this guy, Rob Lathram, from a theater company in Santa Barbara, California, because they were in Colorado at the time touring with their show. And so he sat down with us, listened to what we had to say, and gave us a lot of great advice. What he told us was, that you need to plan for the future, this is not a one-time thing. You know if this is your dream you've got to make it happen. But, again he said too, "I really don't think that *Chorus Line* is the show you should do." But he gave us reasons, which nobody else was giving us reasons. He said, "First of all, your audience will never buy into it — your audience will never buy into a cast of disabled people auditioning for *A Chorus Line*." He said it's a show we could probably do in the future once we're established, but it's not a show for you to do right now. By that point, I had already been given the reins of director for the first show, and I was brokenhearted, I wanted to do that show so bad. But in listening to all these people, I realized that they were right. I don't care how much you want to do a show, they were absolutely right. *Chorus Line* would have been a flop for us, and people would've laughed at us, right off the stage. Not in a good way, you know not laughing with us but laughing at us, and I really didn't want that — I wanted this to be a professional company. When I say professional I'm going back to what many people had told us back then, that the only difference between professional and amateur is that professionals get paid. And in our mind, we *were* getting paid. No, we weren't getting money, but for us the opportunity to be able to perform again was all the payment we needed. But I wanted a show that wasn't… We didn't want them to feel sorry for us. We wanted them to believe that, that we were really actors, and that we really cared about our performance. So we sat there one weekend and threw out all these other ideas for shows to do, and finally decided upon *Guys and Dolls*. It was an excellent

> choice, because it was a show that I was well familiar with because I had already been in it. Plus, I think still even today that's *Guys and Dolls* is the epitome of Broadway musicals, because of its elaborate use of color, the characters are bigger than life and I think that that is so important in theater, and it's not offensive to anyone. It's a fun show that everybody likes, it's got music that everybody recognizes. And so, when we finally agreed to do *Guys and Dolls* I was ecstatic because it meant I got to be creative. (Vigil interview 2012)

In that first year, the group learned the importance of long-term planning. They achieved their dream of being on stage again, and producing a show of their own. But, they also learned that in order to make their dream sustainable long-term, they needed to take into consideration the expectations of the audience. The audience needed to believe the possibility of these characters being disabled people. If the company members wanted more than a condescending pat on the back, and wanted the opportunity to perform again, their disabilities needed to work within the world of the Broadway musical that they were staging. The dream has sustained for the long-term; recently, Phamaly began paying its actors on par with other semi-professional companies around Metropolitan Denver. But, that first production was a multiple year struggle to get off the ground. "None of us got paid," says Vigil, "I mean not even myself as director, but we had a hell of a show."

MISSION

Phamaly mainly focuses on performing canonical works with casts of disabled performers. Phamaly's mission has been to produce traditional theatre in nontraditional ways (i.e. with disabled performers), not necessarily to produce theatre about disability. The company

was founded by actors who loved traditional theater and who also happened to have disabilities. The founders' intent in forming the company was to provide a creative outlet in traditional theater roles for those who would typically be excluded from other companies because of their disabilities. The Phamaly mission is "to provide professional theater opportunities and artistic development for performers with disabilities, and to promote the inclusion of people with disabilities in the performing arts community" ("About Phamaly" 2012).

In keeping with its mission of producing professional theatre, Phamaly is concerned first and foremost with the artistic quality of its productions. On the company's website, a list of "Core Values" is included after the mission statement. The first value listed is "Artistic Excellence: Commitment to high-quality theater artistry." While the company does have other concerns, artistic excellence takes precedence. The members of Phamaly wish to partake in traditional theater productions, even if they inhabit nontraditional bodies. When the founders began the company, they were creating a performance opportunity for themselves but also hoping to open the door to performance opportunities at other theaters. Co-founder Gregg Vigil says, "We wanted to give people with disabilities the opportunity to perform in traditional theater in a nontraditional way. I know I'm just paraphrasing what the mission statement says, but that is exactly what it was. I really believed that for people with disabilities to get accepted into the theater community, a group like Phamaly was going to help open that door" (Vigil interview 2012).

In a way, the social change that Phamaly was creating was a covert byproduct. They were aiming to do the same as all other theater artists – create great theater – despite the fact that others thought their disabilities should preclude even the attempt to achieve that goal. They were not explicitly aiming to communicate a social message, they were aiming to perform theater.

While the company acknowledges an element of social change is inherent to what it does, this is not their main focus. Any social change that is achieved comes from the act of having disabled actors embody roles apparently written for able-bodied actors, rather than coming from the scripts themselves. The other core values listed under the mission statement on the company's website recognize the fact that inherent in any representation of disability will be elements of a social message. By performing an act that is atypical of disabled people, the company changes audience perceptions. Phamaly's other core values include, "Empowerment: Encouraging and supporting the development and full realization of professionalism for performers with disabilities," "Awareness: Education that challenges perceptions about people with disabilities and their capabilities," and "Inclusion: Providing, advocating for and building a sense of community to ensure access and opportunities for performers with disabilities."

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

Phamaly bridges the worlds between theater company and non-profit organization. As such, the company has employees dedicated to each aspect. While its goal is to produce standard theatre, its mission of providing opportunities for disabled theater artists enables Phamaly to draw grant money from arts organizations and disability advocacy groups. Phamaly has long used these grants to broaden its reach and to hire professional technicians and designers who improve the technical aspects of its shows. However, the hiring of full-time employees is a relatively recent development for the group.

In its first year of existence, Phamaly had been run almost entirely by Gregg Vigil. But he enjoyed the acting side of theatrical production so much that he preferred to focus on it. Moreover, he felt that the company could grow artistically if somebody with more experience

took over the directing duties. In the company's second year, it had received more money than in the first which allowed growth in personnel. Vigil recalls, "We definitely got more money, but it was not just from the Colorado Council for the Arts now. We had gotten some private support. Mark Dissette, who had ended up being my assistant director for *Guys and Dolls*, directed our second show. I stepped down after that first one, because it was exhilarating but it was just too much for me" (Vigil interview 2012).

By its third year of producing musicals, Phamaly had hired a choreographer, Debbie Stark. "We almost didn't get her, I mean she almost walked out on us," says Vigil, "I don't think she really thought about what she was going to see when she came into that room and saw all of these people with disabilities sitting there. She was taken aback by it all, and walked out the room and headed toward the elevator." Her doubts arose because she was not sure how to translate her knowledge of movement and dance to disabled performers. One of the other founding actresses caught Stark by the elevator before she left the building and convinced her to stay. "Debbie really doubted herself, her ability at that moment. But after talking with [the actress] for a few minutes, she came back into the room and basically history was made from that moment on." Since that time Stark has won numerous awards from Denver theater organizations for her choreography with Phamaly and still works with the company more than 20 years later.

The company continued to grow and hired its first artistic director in 2000. The previous year Phamaly had mounted *Side Show*, a musical about conjoined twins and their lives among circus freaks. The show garnered the company national attention and the Mayor's Award for Excellence in the Arts from Wellington Webb, Denver's mayor of the time (Lillie 32). This success prompted the company to consider its future growth, and Steve Wilson (who holds an MFA from the National Theatre Conservatory) was hired to serve as artistic director: "the year

after the first production of *Side Show*, Steve Wilson's first show was *Grand Hotel*" (Vigil interview 2012). The artistic director directs the summer musical and is in charge of planning the company's season, which in 2012, comprises five different plays. He also ensures high artistic standards across the variety of shows if other directors are hired.

Nonetheless, the rest of Phamaly's employees were all part-time until the company hired a full-time Executive Director in 2008. The Executive Director is in charge of day-to-day operations, fundraising, and the hiring and firing of other staff members. He reports directly to the Board of Directors. The Board of Directors is composed of volunteers from both within and outside the theater community. Bylaws stipulate that members from the acting company must be on the board, and also that at least four members of the Board of Directors must be disabled persons.

Currently, Phamaly also employs a production manager in charge of overseeing aspects of producing a play, a development and marketing assistant in charge of grant writing and assisting with promotions, a community tours coordinator in charge of outreach programs, a media relations liaison, and a volunteer coordinator in charge of maintaining a stable of volunteers to help backstage at Phamaly productions. Actors for the company are found through auditions similar to any other theater company, with the caveat that the auditioning actor must have some disability as defined under the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Volunteers are essential to what Phamaly does. They are vital for helping paralyzed actors with costume changes, blind actors with safely walking around the theater, and assisting actors with cognitive impairments, among other things.

For technical aspects of production, Phamaly contracts labor from local theater technicians. Stage managers, designers, run crew, are each hired on a per show basis. Because

the company puts on full-scale "Broadway style" productions, large numbers of staff and employees are required.

COMPANY MEMBERS

A unique aspect of Phamaly is that it draws talent from wide ranges of disabilities and from differing levels of theatrical experience. Some members are actors who have become disabled. Others are disabled people who wished to challenge themselves by doing something new.

For example, Stephen Hahn has been with the company since the first production of *Guys and Dolls*. He was one of the actors found by other company members, in his case, at a local shopping mall. Hahn has spina bifida and walks with a cane. Because of his disability, the founders approached him to ask if he had interest in being on stage. At the time he had little interest in theater, but was passionate about disability advocacy and agreed to be in the show. More than 20 years later Hahn has grown as an actor and was named “Best Actor in a Musical” by Denver’s *Westword* newspaper for his portrayal of Gaston in Phamaly’s 2010 production of *Beauty and the Beast*.

On the other hand, Lucy Roucis was an actress just beginning to receive jobs in Hollywood. She had secured an agent and several small roles. But at 27, Roucis was diagnosed with early onset Parkinson’s. “My agents had dropped me, they didn’t want me because I wasn’t ‘perfect’” (*There’s Still Hope for Dreams* 2009). Since that time, she has been one of Phamaly’s most well respected actresses with several “Best Actress” and “Best Supporting Actress” nominations from Denver news outlets.

Another Phamaly actress, Regan Linton, had dabbled in theater during her time at

Denver's East High School and had taken a few classes during college. "I did more theater for social change, and theater in the community type stuff. I was a theater major for about two weeks of my first semester, but then I decided that I did not want to be a theater major" (Linton interview 2012). During college, Linton was in a car accident and became a paraplegic. Eventually she auditioned for a Phamaly show, displayed immense talent, and is now in the MFA Acting program at the University of California at San Diego.

Linton had not seen a Phamaly show until after her injury occurred. When she moved back to Denver after college, Linton still had apprehensions about joining the company. "I originally missed the audition in 2005, because I wasn't really sure if I wanted to do it or not. I was really vacillating because I was really uncertain about it, and nervous I think. I wasn't really sure what the group was, and wondering if this was the right community for me. I wasn't used to being around people with disabilities and being honest about that identity" (Linton interview 2012).

Her biggest hang up was concerns about being stared at onstage in her wheelchair. She didn't want to display her vulnerabilities for a full auditorium. "'How do I get back on stage in a chair? I'll look like an idiot,'" she thought, "I still remember during *Joseph* [*and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* in 2005, her first show with the company], doing some of the choreography and thinking, 'What am I doing? I look so dumb,' just not feeling comfortable with my physical persona anymore" (Linton interview 2012).

I asked what changed this for her. How could she go from being uncomfortable with performing with other disabled people, to standing out as the only wheelchair using MFA acting student in the country? (Moore "Regan Linton" 2012). "Phamaly, Phamaly, Phamaly!" she responded. Linton feels she may talk about it too much these days, but says that she felt a big

change in herself at the moment of getting onstage in *Joseph*, being surrounded by everybody and looking across the stage at the various disabled people, and "rolling onstage during 'Go, Go, Go Joseph' which was the song with the choreography I was most uncomfortable with, and then just realizing 'Who gives a shit!?' I feel like the power of performing with everybody and being in that community that first year is what changed it for me" (Linton interview 2012).

One reason she initially had second thoughts about auditioning for the company was because of concerns about the artistic quality of the productions. "I liked the shows I had seen, but the class I graduated with at East was a very accomplished theater class. So, I think I was uncertain about the artistic merit. I didn't want to have to identify myself as a person with a disability over identifying myself as an artistic being" (Linton interview 2012). She had concerns at first that the company might not be as interested in artistry as creating a "kind of a feel good thing which would be nice for disabled people" (Linton interview 2012). Today, she says she wanted an artistic challenge at the time and has been very satisfied with what she received from Phamaly. "I think I realized that what Phamaly does really well," she says, "is bring in both elements [combining] the empowerment and the social experience for people with disabilities with accomplished art."

Linton's comfort with being on stage again came from focusing on what was important to her and deciding that it did not matter what others thought of her body. It came also because the quality of the productions enabled her to feel comfortable as part of the group. "I was so fucking afraid of being disabled," she says, "But I realized I was worrying about something which was ridiculous. There were all these people with disabilities onstage, but they were amazing people so the 'fuck it' aspect was a part of it. I'm still alive, I should be doing these things!"

While she admires the artistry of Phamaly, Linton does recognize that the uniqueness of

the company's mission to work with myriad disabilities presents a significant challenge to any director. She feels that any director can come in to work with Phamaly and realize: "Oh shit, this isn't going to work with my idea because of the physical challenges" (Linton interview 2012). She believes that this challenge is a good thing because directors must learn to approach blocking and rehearsals in a new way. "It's a unique company because you can't just depend on your typical go-to tricks in your bag which I think is awesome artistically" (Linton interview 2012). If the disabilities of the actors are dealt with well and incorporated by the actors into their characters, the disabilities can actually benefit the show artistically, in her view.

Joining Phamaly changed Linton's life. She realized she could still be an accomplished theater artist and encourage disabled people to remain actively involved in what they loved through the company. "It was important to get back up onstage and realize I love doing this. And then also the artistry, being in good hands with the creative team, and also realizing I was surrounded by some pretty talented actors and performers, was great" (Linton interview 2012).

SAMPLE PRODUCTIONS

In 2009, I performed in Phamaly's production of *Man of La Mancha* at the Denver Performing Arts Complex's Space Theatre. More recently, in 2011, I performed in Phamaly's production of Jim Leonard, Jr.'s *The Diviners* at the Aurora Fox Theatre and the Arvada Center. My participation in these performances gave me new insight into the audience/performer relationship and how Bertolt Brecht's alienation effect interplays with the audience's willing suspension of disbelief. In watching a Phamaly production, audience members experience a dialogue between actor and character that is absent from typical productions of a play ("typical" in this sense meaning productions of a play featuring actors with typical or non-disabled bodies).

To demonstrate this, I will use two specific examples from Phamaly productions, *Man of La Mancha* and *The Diviners*. Merely by appearing onstage, disabled performers not only challenge perceptions of disability but also can give new insight into Brecht's alienation effect.

In Phamaly's 2009 production of *Man of La Mancha*, the actor who played the role of Aldonza was a paraplegic who used a wheelchair for mobility. The script of *Man of La Mancha* calls for Aldonza to be raped onstage. To perform this scene, the rapists lifted Aldonza out of her wheelchair, carried her around the stage, and eventually placed her on a table where the rape took place. At the end of the scene, some of the assailants pushed the actor's wheelchair out one vomitorium, while the other assailants carried the paralyzed actor out through an opposite vomitorium.

For Aldonza's next scene, she reenters and confronts the hero of the play, her admirer Alonso Quijana who proclaims himself to be Don Quixote. In an attempt to compel Quijana to abandon his delusions of love for her, Aldonza sings to him, "A lady has modest and maidenly airs, and a virtue I somehow suspect that I lack; it's hard to remember these maidenly airs in a stable laid flat on your back!" and from another verse, "You have shown me the sky, but what good is the sky to a creature who'll never do better than crawl?" (Wasserman 1966). In Phamaly's production of *Man of La Mancha*, the actor playing Aldonza did not return to her wheelchair before performing this scene. Instead she dragged herself onstage, trailing her paralyzed legs behind her. Aldonza's lines about lying "flat on [her] back" and never doing "better than crawl" were given another level of literal meaning and an added emotional weight as the actor was prostrate and crawling in a very real sense.

For a woman who uses a wheelchair it is very realistic and natural that after being assaulted and having her wheelchair stolen that she would have to crawl on the ground until she

found another person willing to help her. However, for the audience, this is an unexpected act that takes them out of their realm of comfort and forces them, in a Brechtian maner, to reconsider their relationship with what is occurring onstage. The Brechtian alienation effect, requires the audience to rethink its own stereotypes and assumptions: "a representation that alienates is one which allows us to recognize the subject, but at the same time makes it seem unfamiliar" (Brecht 1957 192). Watching the paralyzed woman crawl on the floor outside of her wheelchair casts a familiar subject in an unfamiliar light. Audience members may believe that they can understand or empathize with the situation of a wheelchair user. However, it seems likely that most audience members would not have been contemplated what life is like for a paraplegic without a wheelchair. In this way, the audience is able to recognize the actor/character but she is cast in an unfamiliar light. Those who attend Phamaly shows often state that once the play is underway it is easy to forget that everyone in the cast has a disability. But once one of the characters is placed onstage in a way that seems unfamiliar, the fact of disability is turned back upon the audience for the audience to reconsider. The situation reminds us of the reality of the disability, instead of the disability as a theatrical stage device. This unfamiliar situation reminds the audience that not only is the character a paraplegic but so is the actor. They are forced to reconsider their assumptions and stereotypes about what disabled people can accomplish onstage and offstage. It is the naturalism itself and the full on commitment to a fully integrated character choice that distances the audience from the onstage proceedings. Oddly, in this instance, the more fully the disabled actor got into character the more alienating it was for the audience.

The other occurrence that forced me to reconsider the nature of Brecht's alienation effect happened during Phamaly's 2011 production of *The Diviners.* One of *Diviners*'s actors was entirely blind, yet he played a sighted character. The audience seemed willing to accept this

entirely, except for one specific instance where the actor rode a bike into the wings of the stage. The needs of the play required that the character himself was able to see. The character in the play makes several references to watching the clouds off in the distance and to witnessing the actions of other characters. Because of the skill and commitment of the actor in *The Diviners*, he was able to play a sighted character even though he had been blind since he was an infant. In these instances, the audience was willing to accept that even though the actor himself could not view these things, the character could. However, the script calls for the character to test out his newly repaired bicycle by riding it offstage. This was accomplished by having a stagehand waiting in the wings tapping the floor with a piece of wood so that the actor could follow the sound. The rest of the actors onstage could feel the tension in the audience as the actor mounted the bicycle. Each night, the rest of us actors would have to ignore the gasps from the audience as he mounted a bicycle and the applause of approval as he safely reached his destination. The naturalistic style of the production also required us to treat the situation as if it were absolutely normal and expected for us within the world of the play. The audience was willing to accept a blind actor "watching the storm clouds roll in" but the (perceived) danger of watching him ride a bicycle took the audience out of the moment, even though both of these made perfect sense for the character. Because of this extraordinary situation, his disability was revealed in a new way.

The actor playing this role did everything in his power to fully become the character he was playing, but the audience rejected his ability to do so in this one instance. For the actor himself, riding a bicycle in a designated pattern was just another carefully rehearsed function to be performed onstage. He had rehearsed the bicycle scene as diligently as he had rehearsed any of his lines or any of his other stage business. Everything that he did onstage was chosen so as to naturalistically fully transform himself into his character. According to Bertolt Brecht, "The

western actor does all he can to bring his spectator into the closest proximity to the events and the character he has to portray. To this end he persuades him to identify himself with him (the actor) and uses every energy to convert himself as completely as possible into a different type, that of the character in question" (Brecht 1957 93). By performing tasks normally reserved for a person with full vision, the blind actor had fully become a different type, he had been "wholly transformed into the character played" (Brecht 1957 193). The actor did everything in his power to perform actions onstage that were actions that his character would perform. The conceit of naturalism mandated how the character should act onstage, but the audience became alienated by the naturalism itself. Again, oddly, in this one moment, the more fully the disabled actor got into character the more alienating it became for the audience.

According to co-founder Gregg Vigil, the first time Phamaly integrated dance numbers into a show was in their third year for a production of *Anything Goes*. "*Anything Goes* is a tap show. Instead of a tap show, we made it into a clap show, which was all Debbie [Stark]'s idea," he says. The chorus was taught different rhythms to clap out in unison. "Once you put them together, it was unbelievable," says Vigil, "because it did sound like we were tapping on that stage. It's something that I will never ever forget."

Generally, Phamaly productions integrate disability into the world of the play. In a recent production of *How to Succeed in Business without Really Trying*, the World Wide Wickets Company as written in the script became World Wide Wheelchairs. In *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, the biblical story which is written to be told to a group of schoolchildren, instead was reenacted by an assortment of institutionalized disabled people. In *The Wiz*, Dorothy was played by a blind actress and her real-life guide dog portrayed Toto.

However, *The Diviners* was directed by a director who had not previously worked with

the company and she made the choice to play the character as written instead of changing the character to fit the actor's disability. Also, in a recent production of *Barefoot in the Park*, the Delivery Man character who is supposed to complain about hauling furniture up six flights of stairs was played by a wheelchair-using actor with Cerebral Palsy. It was never explained how the character managed this feat in his wheelchair.

Some people (both in the audience and in the company) get hung up on these details. But others think that no explanation is needed for the company is merely performing the play. This demonstrates that, for Phamaly, producing an entertaining piece of theater is the ultimate goal. As the company professes, they wish to perform traditional theater in non-traditional ways. Sometimes the disability can be integrated into the character as in the aforementioned case from *Man of La Mancha*. Sometimes a disability is ignored as in *The Diviners*, if the character works better within the world of the play as a non-disabled person. Phamaly will do what is appropriate for the script in order to put on the most artistically successful play possible. The company understands that various approaches may be required if such an unusual company is to produce canonical works.

In recent years, Phamaly has also produced a performance composed of original works called *Vox Phamilia*, roughly Latin for "voices of Phamaly." This work comprises pieces workshopped and written by members of the company. The pieces are often irreverent and bawdy "takes" on life with a disability. Like the work of the DisAbility Project which I will explore in the next chapter, these pieces are educational and informative though they are more concerned with comedy and taking the piss out of misconceptions and hang ups that people have about disability.

CRITICAL RESPONSE

From the beginning, one of Phamaly's biggest concerns has been that its shows would be treated gently by theater critics because of the unique and inspirational nature of the company. John Moore, listed by *American Theatre Magazine* in 2011 as one of the United States's 12 most influential theater critics, acknowledged this in a 2003 *Denver Post* review. He wrote, "Maybe I've been so softened by this company that my bloodstream would register nearly toxic levels of Downy" (Moore "*Pajama Game*" 2003).

Even if Moore rooted for Phamaly's success, he was still willing to call the company to task if he felt that a particular show did not meet critical expectations. In 2007, Moore wrote, "At some point, our estimable handicapped theater was bound to suffer in comparison with itself. This may be that time. We are years past asking whether [Phamaly] can stage a blockbuster to the same artistic standards as, say, the Arvada Center. It can. But Phamaly has done better, and *Urinetown* has been done better. It's good, but not as galvanizing as its previous efforts" (Moore "*Urinetown*" 2007).

For many in the company, this mediocre review was a critical highpoint, an indicator that Phamaly was considered a legitimate theater company by leaders of the Denver theatre community. Phamaly needs to entertain its audiences. It failed to reach its own high standards according to this respected critic and he called them on it. His critique was an acknowledgment of "artistic excellence" as the company's primary goal, not eliciting mere pity or sympathy for persons with disabilities. This is not to say that disabilities cannot add artistic value to a show as Moore acknowledged in his review of *Man of La Mancha*. "As [Linton] sings the bitter lament 'Aldonza,' it takes every ounce of restraint not to leap from your seat and help her up. It's just the kind of stage moment that makes Denver's professional handicapped theater company

different from all others. Any musical takes on greater depth when performed by [Phamaly]" (Moore "*Man of La Mancha*" 2009). Moore recognized the actress' disability, but quieted his fears and allowed her to use it to add depth to her character.

One common critique of Phamaly is that often the company relies on inside knowledge. Moore once wrote that, "Phamaly can get a little insidery. When Palmer clasps his heart, then shifts his hands from the left to the right side of his chest, you have to know that's where this particular actor's heart really is in his body to get the joke" (Moore "*Man of La Mancha*" 2009). This reliance upon inside jokes might stem from the fact that the company is unique, has been performing in the same city for more than 23 years, and is attempting to get the audience to engage comfortably with disability in the same manner that the actors do.

An anecdote from *Westword* theater reviewer Juliet Wittman's review of *Man of La Mancha* sums up how the company at its best can engage actor and audience in a special experience. She opines that attendees of a Phamaly show:

> aren't the kind of theater-goers who sit back in their chairs waiting to be entertained. These people are present body and soul, leaning in to the action; you can feel a palpable current between them and the performers. Phamaly is always good, but at its best – as the company is here – it's a revelation, a living demonstration of how the human spirit can transcend physical limitation. My friend and I left the theater feeling saddened, exhilarated and joyful all at once. As we walked to our car, a woman came up behind us and started talking about how much she'd loved the play and what it meant to her, so full of feeling that she couldn't wait to get home to express it, and instead had to share her response with strangers. That's theater, folks. That's how it's supposed to be. (Wittman 2009)

CHAPTER 3

THE DISABILITY PROJECT

FOUNDING OF THE COMPANY

The DisAbility Project is part of That Uppity Theatre of St Louis, Missouri. According to co-founder Joan Lipkin, "The DisAbility Project is about the culture of disability. So we make pieces that specifically speak to experiences of disability, accessibility, barriers--whether it be architectural, educational, or attitudinal, employment, transportation, relationships" (Lipkin interview 2012). Unlike Phamaly, which focuses on producing Broadway standards, the DisAbility Project creates all of their own original material. The company typically performs an hour's worth of individual scenes, all comprising original works, to various community groups, business organizations, schools, etc.

Since 1996, the DisAbility Project has "focused on developing projects that bring together amateur performers with professional artists to create innovative material based on lived experience" ("DisAbility Project" 2012). Co-founded by Joan Lipkin and Fran Cohen, the DisAbility Project represents one of the most comprehensive creative endeavors in the Midwest that addresses issues of disability and creativity. The goal of the group is to create performance that "empowers individuals, honors their stories, sparks imaginations, fosters community, encourages civic dialogue, and enhances public awareness about disability through innovative theatre of the highest quality" ("DisAbility Project" 2012). Unique among many of the disabled theatre companies in the United States, it fosters opportunities for performers with and without disabilities to do educational outreach. Joan Lipkin "had worked with the legendary late theatre director Joe Chaikin at the Atlantic Center for the Arts on a similar short-term project and

realized she wanted to come back to St. Louis to create a local version ("DisAbility Project" 2012). The project was founded by two non-disabled people, in order to provide an outlet for those who are disabled.

The outreach and educational aspects of the group were what drove co-founder Fran Cohen to develop the project. She is an Occupational Therapist, with no previous background in theater. The expertise that she brought the group was her knowledge of the culture of disability through years of working with disabled people. During my interview with her, she could not emphasize strongly enough that for her the DisAbility Project was about disability, not necessarily about theater. When I asked her about her interest in theatrics, drama, and staging, she responded, "I have no desire, none whatsoever. I have no interest in theatrics for myself. But, I think it is a fabulous vehicle for portraying what we want to portray" (Cohen interview 2012).

Cohen's desire was to change perceptions of disability, educate people on the daily life of disabled people, and to foster dialogue. Entertainment, at least as Cohen sees it, was merely a byproduct. "We have page after page of comments from kids," Cohen says, "they're fabulous. 'I'm not mean anymore to someone that's disabled.' I mean there is bullying that goes on when you are different. It doesn't matter what it is, whether you're gay, whether you're blind, whatever; kids, people are cruel sometimes" (Cohen interview 2012). Cohen wanted to use her position to help change this behavior.

The other founder, Joan Lipkin, brought theatrical knowledge to the project. While she had many of the same social goals as Cohen, Lipkin also had years of experience as a playwright and director. Previously, she had founded That Uppity Theater Company, the umbrella group under which the DisAbility Project works. That Uppity Theater Company gives a voice to

various populations of marginalized and ignored people; the company works with abused women, cancer survivors, AIDS patients, and inner-city teens among others. She had "founded That Uppity Theatre Company in 1989 to put the principles of cultural diversity into theatrical practice and to promote civic dialogue" (Lipkin interview 2012).

The impetus for the DisAbility Project came when Cohen learned that Lipkin had recently attended a theater seminar with world-renowned theater director Joseph Chaikin. In his later years Chaikin had become disabled, and was teaching seminars dealing with theater and disability. Cohen tells the story in her own words:

> I graduated from Wash U, and I get their bulletin. Now, the occupational therapy school is part of the medical school and they send this bulletin magazine every month about all the news in the medical school. And, there was an article in there about Joan Lipkin having attended a seminar by a very famous director in Hollywood, Joseph Chaikin, and he had had a stroke. Therefore, he became interested in disability and specifically disability in the theater. So, I read the article and I called her. (Cohen interview 2012)

At the time, Cohen was teaching at Washington University in St. Louis. She contacted Lipkin and asked if she would be interested in coming to the school to give a lecture to the occupational therapy students. Cohen says that Lipkin told her that she had no interest whatsoever in speaking with occupational therapy students in a classroom setting; however, Lipkin did desire to meet with Cohen and discuss other practical opportunities.

Lipkin had no desire to lecture students about what theater could do. Instead, she wished to put into practice the information that she had gained from working with Chaikin. Lipkin wanted to put together a group that composed and performed original works as a means of education and social change. She envisioned the group performing for various community

groups such as schools, community centers, corporate retreats, and any other organization interested in bringing them in. She had concerns that there might not be enough talent in the region to perform canonical Broadway works because the disability and theater movement was in a nascent stage. Lipkin says,

> Instead of trying to fit people into a scenario that they may or may not be successful at (at least in this particular city [St. Louis], because we may or may not have the population, the demographic, the talent to provide) I wanted instead that we devise original work that would speak to what they needed, what they could do. So, it wouldn't be a question of, "Oh I can't hit that note, I can't hit that bar." Instead, it would be a question of how do we cut the fabric to fit what you can do. (Lipkin interview 2012)

Lipkin's idea was to put together a group of disabled actors that modeled inclusion, was organized through the democratic process, and empowered disabled people to speak with their own voices. She felt that Broadway productions, even if performed by disabled actors, spoke to the concerns of the playwright instead of the disabled actor. Instead, she wanted to take a different approach so that the audiences could learn more about the performers themselves, and hear the voices of people who typically were not listened to. In an interview, Lipkin explained her approach to this empowering form of theater:

> It's a very different approach, and it comes out of my interest in a democracy. And, I'll tell you that there are a number of different moments when I began to coalesce this theory. One is that I'm a playwright, and I was having a production in Chicago of a play of mine, and we were auditioning. And we must've had 75 people show up to audition for the roles. I hated the audition process, I hated having to reject people. I felt like they had gotten all dressed up to come down here and it just struck me how many times I was

> going to have to say “no.” I got very interested in my own response to the "no.” And I have done very many many auditions, and I started thinking there was something very interesting about the fact that I was uncomfortable with the "no." And I thought maybe it's because so much of life is about some level of auditioning. It feeds into kind of a competitive spirit, but in the sense that competition leaves so many people feeling "less than." But, of course the show was cast, because there was a script and it called for a very certain kind of people. But, we didn't have to do that. What if we gathered people who wanted to exercise their creative power, and they want to work together, and collectively we want the experience of being on stage and being seen? What if we cut the cloth to fit them, instead of asking them to fit themselves into a pre-manufactured garment, a pre-manufactured show? That is part of where my process, my aesthetic, came from for the DisAbility Project. So when beginning the DisAbility Project my feeling was that some people are going to obviously have more ability, more native talent than others, but I was interested in making it possible to work with anybody who showed up who was sincerely interested in being a part of the group. (Lipkin interview 2012)

Lipkin thought it would be possible to create scripts around the actors, instead of fitting the actors to the scripts. She had already been doing this for several years with That Uppity Theater Company, and felt that the portrayal of disability would work well under this model. Thus, she agreed to meet with Cohen to discuss possibilities.

When the two women met, Cohen brought with her several key figures from their region’s disability rights movement. Cohen wanted to ensure that they would have the blessing of people from within the disability community. Because both Cohen and Lipkin were from outside of the disability community, and wanted to start a project directly tied to disability, they

wanted to make sure that they were not approaching the project from an outsider's perspective. "So we met," says Cohen, "and when we met I convened several people. Having been in this field for so long, I knew Max Starkloff [the director of disability rights advocacy group in St. Louis]. I knew Max when he was first injured at age 19. I knew Jim Tauscher, I don't know if you know these guys. They're not actors at all, they're spinal cord injured and very, very notable in the field. Max started the independent living movement" (Cohen interview 2012). Cohen was not an actor, and she was not disabled at the time; she simply wanted to make sure that she had the right people in the right places from both the theatrical and the disability perspective. "So Joan came over, and I convened all the people I knew," says Cohen, "And, we told them our idea of possibly doing this and they loved it! I wanted to get their approval and their encouragement. And we got it, and that's how it started!"

The two women both had a very clear agenda for the DisAbility Project. They wanted to use theatrical pieces created by the actors themselves as a vehicle for social change. For both women, the educational goals of the project were of utmost importance. Lipkin regarded the artistry of the theatrical group equally important while Cohen emphasized the honesty which came from her several years' work with disabled people. Cohen had thought about putting together something like this for a long time, but did not have the theatrical skill set to pull it off. Nonetheless, her passion for the concept was there:

> It's something that I had been thinking about for years and years and years. It's not fair to discriminate! I don't care what it is. About anybody, or anything. It's not fair! I don't like it, and I did something about it. I don't care whether it's racial, whether it's religious, whether it's disability. It's wrong, period. It hurts people, why should it hurt people? I get tears in my eyes thinking about it. This is a labor of love. I don't make one penny.

> This isn't anything I do for that reason. Luckily, I have a wonderful husband, who I kick out of the house every morning to work. And so I don't need the money. I mean, you can always use money, but it's not my goal here. So, it's a labor of love. (Cohen interview 2012)

Fortuitously, these two remarkable women with similar politics and similar goals lived near each other in the same city. While their end goals were similar, their divergent skill sets and knowledge bases in the areas of theatrical arts and occupational therapy complemented each other ideally to make this new theater company a working reality. The pair funded the theater company through grants from various disability related foundations, arts organizations, and through appearance fees paid by the groups they perform for.

MISSION

Rather than performing previously written works of theater, the DisAbility Project focuses on developing all of its own original material. This process gives a voice to those who are typically underrepresented in theater, educates the general populace about how disabled people see themselves, and serves as a positive model of inclusion for both people with and without disabilities. According to the group's website, "the DisAbility Project brings awareness and sensitivity to issues in the disability community through a combination of art and advocacy that tours to a variety of audiences. The project presents at educational institutions, conferences, special events, festivals, religious and civic groups, and corporations" (“DisAbility Project” 2012). As part of this mission, the group regularly includes question and answer sessions after their performances so that the audience may ask questions about the original works.

Lipkin feels that it is important to perform works by and about real people in real

situations if the audience is truly to be transformed. Although she says that she "can understand how any actor, with or without disabilities, wishes to play Hamlet" (Lipkin interview 2012), affording such opportunities is not the company's focus. While the story of Hamlet is intriguing, Lipkin prefers to tell the stories of those who are typically absent from representation and participation in our cultural landscape ("DisAbility Project" 2012). That Uppity Theatre Company focuses "on creating commissioned work about social issues for corporations, schools from elementary through university-level, and social services agencies. In other ongoing projects, we also pair amateur actors and seasoned professionals to create work about the lives of underrepresented populations" ("DisAbility Project" 2012).

Unlike a traditional theater company which reenacts the stories of fictional characters, the DisAbility Project tells stories derived from the lives of the actors themselves. Thus, the company fights against the hegemony that would typically be reinforced through production of canonical works. Lipkin states, "We're about the people in the culture and the experience of their lives, which is a story that also needs to be told, and so that is what the DisAbility Project does" (Lipkin interview 2012).

Because the company performs original works with the intention of transforming the audience's attitudes, participation through talkback, or question and answer sessions, is essential to their mission. "I have always been interested in the conversation with the audience," says Lipkin, "I think that is really important." The company likes to provoke a change in attitude in their audience and relies upon these talkbacks to allow the audience to express what they have experienced. Professor of Theatre and English Iris Smith of the University of Kansas interviewed Lipkin for *The Drama Review* writing that "Lipkin prefers to write and stage activist theater, that is, theater that presents itself as politically and socially engaged in its community.

As a result, Lipkin's forays into the theater are always performative and provocative" (Smith 1994 96). The company members become further engaged in their community by asking the audience members to join in the performative experience through asking questions; the scenes that they perform serve as provocation to discussion.

In a sense, the company thinks of performance as an invitation to the audience. Through the performance an invitation has been offered, and through the willingness of the actors to display their disabled bodies onstage, the audience then feels that they have been empowered to speak up. The performers are willing to share themselves and discuss taboo subjects, thus indicating to the audience that this is a safe place to speak about such things. Thus, the post-show conversations with the audience become a vital part of the overall performance experience. Lipkin explains this important tie between performer, material, and audience response:

> I feel that the performance is a kind of prompt to the audience. Having shared, having seen the audience, and the audience having seen the actors really give and give their lives — show their humor, show their vulnerability — I feel that the audience is now in a different position to speak. They feel that they can share who they are, because the actors have been so present and so vulnerable with them. That kind of aesthetic and that kind of rich dialogue comes out of community-based work. It doesn't come out of canonical stuff quite so much. We're not going understand as much about these lives, these actors' lives, through pre-manufactured scripts. (Lipkin interview 2012)

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

As an umbrella group under That Uppity Theatre Company, the DisAbility Project shares much of its staff and administration with its parent organization. Like Phamaly, the Project

bridges the worlds between theater company and non-profit organization. Staff and volunteers focus their energies on day-to-day operations, promotions, and booking engagements. Its educational mission, combined with its artistic goals and focus on empowering disabled people, allows the DisAbility Project to draw grant money from arts organizations, disability advocacy groups, and foundations focused on social justice and education. The group uses these monies to develop new works, pay for actors' expenses incurred while travelling to various performance locations, and salaries for full-time employees. However, production costs are kept to a minimum, as the company does not utilize costumes, special effects, or other expensive technical elements. Thus, the company employs minimal technical staff.

Some of the work done for the company is voluntary. For example, the company website lists various volunteer positions such as Resident Photographer, in charge of visual documentation of performances. Also, working on a voluntary basis is co-founder Fran Cohen. Cohen has been ill with cancer and undergoing chemotherapy in recent years, but she is still dedicated to the group and attends every rehearsal. When asked if she still has a place participating in the company, she brightly said, "Absolutely! Every rehearsal, everything. Yes. I have cancer, but I say as long as you have a brain, use it!" According to the company website, Cohen acts as the person in charge of "identification of issues and audiences pertinent to our work" ("DisAbility Project" 2012).

The DisAbility Project also has two choreographers, a vocal coach, and an assistant administrative director/stage manager who routinely work for the company.

To be sensitive to the specific needs of disabled people the company began with an advisory group. "We had an advisory group which was a large group, but we also had a smaller one composed of three people that were selected by the group," says Lipkin, "Some of the things

that came out of it were that you weren't automatically accepted just because you came to a rehearsal. We had to see how you got along with everybody."

However, the vast majority of creative control resides with co-founder Joan Lipkin, who also serves as the company artistic director. Discussing the source of the group's material, she says, "A lot of it is stuff that I have written, but is stuff that I have written with input from the group." One inspiration for material is the pre-rehearsal sharing circle. Lipkin will lead the actors in an exercise, and then help them shape it into performable material. "I would say that I have written the majority of the pieces, but not alone," she says, "They've been written in concert with improvisation, with ideas that people bring in." Lipkin often takes ideas home, types them up, and brings them to the next rehearsal. She feels it is important to ask the group, "This is the actor talking. How much of this do want to go with, and how much do you just want to leave it?" (Lipkin interview 2012).

Lipkin also largely serves as the moderator for post show discussions with the audience. "I try to do talk backs with the audience after every performance, I mean I like to," Lipkin says. "I am not happy when we're shoehorned in and have got to get people in and get them out because I feel, honestly, that there is something missing from the equation."

Lipkin feels that her long tenure with the company enables her to be effective during these Q & A sessions. "You have to know how to handle it. I mean I'm not a kid, I've been doing this for a long time, for 23 years," she says.

While the DisAbility Project mostly focuses on the Greater St. Louis Area, they have also taken their shows around Missouri and Illinois. In recent years the company even travelled to Las Vegas for a conference on disability. Like many other non-profits, paying for these expenses is the biggest hindrance to further growth.

Also volunteering with the group are several professional actors from St. Louis. The DisAbility Project uses actors with and without disabilities. Some of these able-bodied participants come from the social work fields, others are disability educators, and still others are professional actors. None of the actors are paid more than a travel reimbursement.

COMPANY MEMBERS

In accord with its mission of "modeling inclusion," the DisAbility Project draws its actors from both disabled and able-bodied populations. Some company members are disabled people who wish to join a community group intent on educating the general public. Others are theater artists who support the mission of the company. All consider themselves to be both advocates and actors.

Ana Jennings, who has been with the company since 2000, says that the company's dual mission of art and activism is embodied by the actors themselves. "I think we consider ourselves advocates, which encompasses education and activism. Yes, I'm an actor, but I don't consider myself a professional actor. Although I have done stuff for Joan outside of the DisAbility Project" (Jennings interview 2012).

Jennings was 18 years old when she became disabled due to a spinal cord injury. She is now a quadriplegic. She did not participate in theater either before or after her injury, until she became involved with the DisAbility Project. "I was always a ham, but I was always more academically oriented. I got my bachelors degree in psychology, so I was never really in theater — even in high school" (Jennings interview 2012).

After college, Jennings moved to Missouri and received her Master's degree in rehabilitation counseling. "I was working for an independent living center here in St. Louis," she

says, "and, well, they laid me off. They were restructuring or something, so I haven't really worked full-time since 2003." The company has kept her active and involved in a cause about which she is passionate. Jennings reports that during a good year the company performs about once a week. Funding has recently dried up, however, which means that sometimes the company performs only once a month. Even so, company members stay close to and engaged with one another through their weekly rehearsals.

Jennings first became involved because a friend of hers was in the Project and invited her to a performance. "He was one of the founding members of the group. He joined in like 96-97. He had invited me to watch one of their programs. It was so funny and I really enjoyed it so much, I wanted to be a part of it. Joan invited me to one of the rehearsals, and I fell in love with it from then on. I wanted to get involved as soon as I could" (Jennings interview 2012). Since joining, Jennings says that she has helped with directing, writing, and whatever else that will support the company.

She feels that the company is so effective at what it does because "[i]t kind of proposes a solution, it doesn't just state the problem. We try to put a positive spin on things. It's not trying to tell people what they should do. It is asking, 'Wouldn't you want to have access to a place you want to go to?'" (Jennings interview 2012).

I was concerned that some of the disabled members might not like being spoken for by others from outside their community, so I asked Jennings if there was ever any tension between the able-bodied and disabled actors. "No, no," she said very positively. "Like I said, we're pretty much friends. There's always times when someone will say or do something stupid, but it's usually me!"

One of the able-bodied actors in the group is Bobbie Williams, a professional singer and

actress who works in the St. Louis area. “Yes, I'm a professional working actress. I became involved in the DisAbility Project because I had heard about it and I had worked with Joan. Because I knew her, I asked her if I could come and sit in on the group. So I came, and I was enthralled. That was in December of 2009” (Williams interview 2012).

Williams is originally from the East Coast, but her family moved to California and it is there that she got her start in show business. She moved to St. Louis because it was halfway between the two coasts making traveling for her entertainment career easier. Now, though, she works primarily in the St. Louis region. While Williams is a professional actress and singer, she jokes that her work with the DisAbility Project is "pro bono." "We are often given a stipend for gas and travel, but many of our people need more than money," she says, "They need items and services and things of that nature. Some need jobs, and these things need to be addressed.” She appreciates that the very problems being dealt with by some of the disabled actors are the issues that the DisAbility Project addresses. She says that while many of the disabled company members have not accomplished great things according to conventional social norms, they are empowering themselves and bettering their situations. “The people that we deal with are people that have not ‘made it,’ [but they] are still *making a difference*" (Williams interview 2012, her emphasis).

Although the work is basically unpaid, Williams remains interested in the DisAbility Project because the group works together to discover effective ways to make a difference in the lives of those for whom and with whom they perform. She appreciates that even the company’s warm-up exercises differ from the standard ones. “We start off with the mental and the emotional warm-up. We do physical warm-ups, we do vocal warm-ups, whatever the person is able to do” (Williams interview 2012). She is quick to point out that these exercises are not

better or worse, more or less, than the typical ones; they are simply different. The company begins rehearsals with the "Sharing Circle" which is important to how the company members interact with one another. Williams says that the group relishes having the opening session, “especially after we have been away from each other for a long time. It's a connector, and it's an icebreaker to get all these people from different backgrounds in sync with each other. Other people would use physical warm-ups for that. There is not necessarily less physical warm-up, it is just different.”

Everything about the DisAbility Project is geared to creating greater inclusion and deeper interpersonal connection. The company achieves its goals not only through the relationships between performers and spectators but also through the relationships among its diverse array of disabled and nondisabled, professional and nonprofessional actors.

SAMPLE PRODUCTIONS

My experience viewing performances by the DisAbility Project comes from videotaped productions available to everyone online. As the Disability Project is primarily concerned with spreading its message to the largest population possible, recordings of several of its performances have been uploaded to the Internet. In his book *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*, Augusto Boal remarked that theater of the oppressed must be able to reach beyond the performance space. "When does a session of The Theater of the Oppressed end? Never — since the objective is not to close a cycle, to generate a catharsis, or to end the development. On the contrary, its objective is to set a process in motion, to stimulate transformative creativity" (Boal 2002 245). The DisAbility Project attempts to do this by making its performances available online, and also through question and answer sessions which take place after the performances.

Recorded performances do not afford the opportunity to have question-and-answer sessions after the show, but as these Q & A sessions are vital to what the company does, I interviewed Joan Lipkin about the process.

Before the company can get to the question and answer period, they must first entertain the audience with a high-quality, engaging theatrical performance. "We select the pieces very carefully for each audience. We want to have an arc that builds through the pieces and culminates in the final piece" (Lipkin interview 2012). The company selects pieces for adult audiences that they would not choose for children, but Lipkin feels that overall the work is appropriate for any audience.

The style and visual aspects of the DisAbility Project performances reinforce the idea that the work is appropriate for everyone. One notable aspect is that the performers have a projection screen behind them upon which the dialogue being spoken can be projected for everyone in the audience to read. This enables those who may have a hearing impairment to nonetheless appreciate the performance. The idea behind the company is that performance opportunities are available to everyone, as is the joy of spectatorship.

Lipkin talks about the importance of inclusion: "I try to make a stage where everybody can get to perform. It is more challenging for some people to manage certain roles, so I don't put them in positions if I think that they can't be successful. But, I also give them opportunities to try it. A lot of times, we'll rotate a part that might be a lead or central to a particular pieces" (Lipkin interview 2012). The group regularly rotates actors in and out of roles so that many people have an opportunity to perform. Lipkin acknowledges that some people will have more innate ability than others, but the variety of opportunities is nonetheless important to her. "My intention is to enable somebody to do as well as they can and to be seen in as positive a light as possible"

(Lipkin interview 2012).

Augusto Boal understood the activist and emancipative roles of culture for individuals and communities in societies where power is in the hands of the few, where people are excluded from being seen and heard, where they have no position from which to effect social change. Boal also felt that cultural practices could be used as a tool to pacify and numb the masses and wished to use it instead to awaken and energize audiences. For Lipkin, the artistic quality exhibited in her productions goes a long way toward achieving this goal. She wishes to use theater, a tool of the dominant culture, in a new way to spread the message of an population oppressed by dominant culture. Skill at using that tool is necessary for it to be effective. I asked her if she was concerned about acting ability in the productions. She vehemently responded, "Yes, of course, because the purpose and the value of the DisAbility Project is for the performers but also for the audience. We have to put together actors, and put on a performance that stimulates and engages the audience." Without the initial step of quality entertainment, the audience will not be engaged by the stories and people in front of them.

A recent performance was given to a group of students at the St. Louis Art Museum. Lipkin devised a special piece to connect the students with their environment and with the actors from the company. She described how pleased she was with the results:

> We had this performance at the art museum, it was so fantastic. I mean, all of our performances have some level of fantastic, because usually it is something that people haven't seen and it touches them in a way that they often are not through usual theater. But this piece was at the art museum, and I thought maybe we ought to think of ourselves as pieces of art. So we made this piece which became a living sculpture called "I Am a Work of Art, Because…" I think the first line was, "Because I climb mountains in my

> wheelchair." But then I created a worksheet for the students when they come in, so that when they arrive early we can do something meaningful with them. I asked them to write down why they thought they were a piece of art. During the Q & A after the performance, I asked them which pieces they responded to. Most of the students really loved this piece because they felt that they were also a piece of art. I told them, "I would love to hear about some of these pieces of art. Would somebody like to stand up and tell us why they think they are a piece of art?" And these kids they are saying, "I'm a piece of art because I listen to my mother. I'm a piece of art because I got my homework done. I'm a piece of art because I'm nice to my brother." I mean, they were all saying things that are usual human qualities that are usually overlooked. But it was gorgeous. So I can speak to what our intent is. Our intent is social justice. Our intent is social transformation our intent is to create a more civil society where people are more loving, and compassionate, and accommodating to each other all around. We all need some level of accommodation, so we want to create performances that help the audience get to those places. (Lipkin interview 2012)

In this instance, the company truly accomplished their goal of using theater to affect audience response and increase interaction. Augusto Boal wrote that, "Theater is a form of knowledge; it should and can also be a means of transforming society. Theater can help us build our future, rather than just waiting for it" (Boal 2002 xxxi). Through this integrative performance, the DisAbility Project hopefully transformed a future generation's appreciation of art, theater, and disabled people.

Performative interaction is central to all that the DisAbility Project does. The performance of rehearsal can be just as important as performance before an audience. One of the

company's best pieces grew from an actor using the pre-rehearsal "Sharing Circle" to entertain his fellow actors. The actor had just been hospitalized with a urinary tract infection, and upon returning to the group he started to make jokes about Club Med. He insisted he was not at the hospital, he was "at Club Med." Lipkin was listening to his humorous take on disability and hospitalization, and his performance inspired her to write a piece for audiences. She says that she "started to listen to him and thought, 'Oh my God. This could be a great piece.' So I asked him to tell us more about this Club Med place, what made it Club Med. I wanted him to stay within the metaphor of it being a vacation. I wanted him just to describe everything as if it were a vacation, all the tests, the interaction with the nurses" (Lipkin interview 2012). By performing for his fellow actors this person was able to create/inspire a piece that effectively portrayed his experience of being disabled to public audiences.

Performance for other disabled people does not only occur at rehearsals. The group is often hired to perform for audiences of disabled people. In 2010, the DisAbility Project was doing a performance for a technology conference in Columbia, Missouri. People with a wide range of disabilities were at the conference learning about assistive devices and technological aids. "We were sort of closer towards the end of the day," Lipkin remembers, "and we can have a profound effect on the audience, both people with and without disabilities. A lot of times, people with disabilities have never, never seen themselves on stage" (Lipkin interview 2012). Rarely do disabled people see their lives depicted in a way that is honoring. This was one such instance and it made for a moving experience for some audience members to recognize themselves in the onstage characters. "We were performing this piece called 'Hello,' about a child who is trying to make a friend with a person in a wheelchair. The mother doesn't want her to," says Lipkin, "There was a man [in the audience] who was blind and he started to cry"

(Lipkin interview 2012). Afterward, during the Q & A, Lipkin addressed the man from the stage, asking him what prompted this reaction:

> I asked him, "What is going on? What is going on with you? What are you feeling?" He was overwhelmed, and he said, "I feel so alone." So, I asked how many people in the audience are feeling that way. And many of them said that they felt that way, too. We all can feel that way, we all can feel so discarded, and dismissed, and treated badly as people with disabilities. But when you see someone who is emotionally cracking open, you don't bypass that. You go with that, you stay with that, that is what you have been put there for. That is why you're doing it, but you have to know how to do it! So I try to stay with the moment, and transform it so that we can all stay with it and learn from it. So I asked, "How many people feel this way, and why do you feel this way?" And people said, "Because nobody listens to me." They told the truth! Well, the world cracks open if we tell the truth. So, people start witnessing and I'm listening to them and I tell them that these things are so true, "But right now we're here together, and isn't it so wonderful that we are expressing this together. We are in a community, in a space where we can name what is going on and how we feel. Doesn't it feel good to tell the truth and really be together?" But then the administrator who brought us in is freaking out, rushing in with the evaluation, "No, we got a stop here! We've got to go! We've got to go!" But we were in a really holy moment, frankly. We had gotten to the reason that we were there and they wanted to cut it off, because there's a real fear of honesty and connection. But, I thought that it would be very hurtful to cut it off right then. So I said, "No, wait. If you're comfortable, I want you to move closer to somebody else in the audience. I want you to touch them, touch their arm, touch their hand, or touch their shoulder. We have

> got a lot of quads in the room, so if you want to, lean your head on somebody else's shoulder. Let's just breathe in this moment together." Now, what is amazing is that we can get an e-mail list. Now I believe in social media because it is no substitute for real interaction, but it is a form of reinforcement and connection, especially for people with disabilities it is a way for them to stay present. Of course, this administrator woman was very angry with me. But, our evaluations were off the charts: "This is the best thing I've ever seen." (Lipkin interview 2012)

The Q & A session enabled the audience to participate in the performance itself because Lipkin handled it as she did. She had audience members physically connect with one another: this physical act engaged the performance, actors, and spectators in one communal transformative act. Hopefully, the email list that was compiled set in motion a process that leads to positive transformations that continue outside of the conference itself.

None of this connection with the audience could happen if the DisAbility Project did not have on stage a quality performance and a diversity of performers. Lipkin says, "I really love having the whole range of disabilities: cognitive, sensory, mobility. Because, I feel strongly that it is important for the audience. I feel it is important for the audience, because it gives them, no matter who they are, a point of entry" (Lipkin interview 2012). She believes that audience members without disabilities must re-examine the world that they go home to and live in. Theater is inherently voyeuristic. Able-bodied people must rethink their act of staring at disabled people outside of the theater after being encouraged to stare at and engage with disabled performers. "That way," Lipkin says, "we're not just casting the actors as the 'other.' We actually speak to the freak show element. We have a piece done from the perspective of the audience. [The actors] argue that they don't want to watch a bunch of disabled people act, that

they wouldn't be there if it wasn't required" (Lipkin interview 2012).

Toward the end of the piece, the actors turn to the spectators and address them directly: "Yo, audience. We're not what you thought we were, are we? We want to have a good time. And we can't have a good time if you don't have a good time. We want you to relax, sit back, and enjoy yourselves, because we will. We know that there is a difference between you laughing at us and you laughing with us. So… deal!" Lipkin appreciates that the disabled actors in the piece "channel what they think the audience, many members of the audience, might be thinking" (Lipkin interview 2012). Like all DisAbility Project pieces this sketch refocuses what people think they know about disabled people and encourages them to continue to develop their new viewpoint outside of the theater.

CRITICAL RESPONSE

The DisAbility Project is more concerned with audience response and direct feedback during talkbacks than with media reviews. Other than the previously mentioned anecdote in which the woman who had hired the company was upset with Joan Lipkin while the participants in the audience praised the experience, the feedback is primarily positive.

When the company was hired by the Defense Information System Agency to educate its Federal Executive Board Program on employing workers with disabilities, Lisa M. Dean, the agency's Chief of Finance Management, sent a letter to the theater company stating that, "The group's theatrical presentation was perfect. Your personal participation was superb; the talent and human interest in the audience was magnificent" ("DisAbility Project" 2012).

The company also receives praise for the way their format makes their message more effective. Not only is the performance itself entertaining, but the message is well received and

understood. “I must tell you also that our total student body has never received any group any more warmly than your troupe. They understood you. They were moved by what they saw and heard,” writes Franklin S. McCallie, Principal of Kirkwood (Missouri) High School (“DisAbility Project” 2012).

Some DisAbility Project attendees acknowledge that they are better able to understand disabled people outside of the performance space. Such responses confirm that the company is achieving its goal of using theater to change how others view disability. "Thank you so much for the wonderful production you provided at the Direct Support Professionals Conference of St. Charles County. You made the audience more aware of the importance of their roles, as Direct Support Professionals, play in the lives of people with disabilities,” Sherrill Wayland, Inclusion and Training Specialist at St. Charles County Community College wrote in a letter (“DisAbility Project” 2012).

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

So far in the thesis, I have shown the origins and various styles of works performed by two theater companies featuring disabled actors. Here, in the conclusion, I will gather up the data and offer some big ideas about what it all means. Specifically, I will explore the work of Phamaly and the DisAbility Project in terms provided by two different theoretical frameworks: one, familiar to theatre scholars, focuses attention of the ideas of Bertolt Brecht and Augusto Boal; the other, familiar to disability studies scholars, derives from an essay by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Professor of Women's Studies at Emory University.

In "Ways of Staring," Garland-Thomson offers a theory on how staring informs our ability to know each other and the world around us. She describes the staring process as often defining the interactions between disabled and non-disabled people. Garland-Thomson details a process through which the person being stared at can take command of the staring engagement. As disabled people are often stared at by non-disabled, they have developed different modes of taking command, and these two theater companies demonstrate two such modes.

Phamaly and the DisAbility Project have both developed methods for disabled people to deal with the stares that they inevitably receive from others. Staring is essential for humans to process information. "We stare with and at faces to know each other and the world. Faces mark our distinctiveness and particularity, highlight our appearance and look, indicate emotion and character, and display our dignity and prestige" (Garland-Thomson 2006 175). The disabled bodies of these companies' actors mark the actors in a similarly distinctive way. When encountering a strange face or a misshapen body, we use staring to access our memories and

make judgments about what is presently before us.

When a person is visually different from the norm, as in the case of many disabilities, the observer of such a person may not have the prior experience necessary to deal with this new information. Disability often causes a person to have a visage "that violates appearance standards targeting one as a spectacle, [and] the loss of self-possession and often inadvertent breach of social etiquette inherent in the stare mark the startled viewer as vulnerable and inappropriate" (Garland-Thomson 2006 179). The starer may feel ashamed for her act of staring, but nonetheless needs to stare in order to process a visual experience which she has never had before. We may feel it is inappropriate to stare at disabled persons, but disabled performers onstage invite this attention. It is central to the act of performance.

The person being stared at often has the most power to manage the stare. This idea is central to how theater works. "Staring is the snagging of the eye by the novel. We are drawn by the unanticipated and the inexplicable in an effort to make sense of the experience" (Garland-Thomson 2006 173). In theater, the audience response can range from a gaze to an outright stare, depending on the novelty of what is onstage. Disability (like other novel experiences) onstage can be unanticipated and inexplicable, prompting a stare from the audience. The performers invite the audience to stare so that the performers dictate the terms upon which the stare is occurring. "The person usually most adept at managing the staring encounter is the object of the stare. This is surprising, perhaps even counterintuitive, because our understanding of the staring relationship most often centers on the perspective of the starer" (Garland-Thomson 2006 178). In a theatrical setting, the audience fills the role of the starer. Because of this, the performer becomes the object of the stare and must learn to manage how the audience performs the act of staring. The disabled performer, especially, must learn to manage various forms of

staring; on stage he is being stared at as a performer *and* as a disabled person.

Garland-Thomson describes a four-step process through which the object of a stare can orchestrate the complex choreography of staring in his or her favor. "The first element in the staring process is for the staree to develop a keen sense of being scrutinized" (Garland-Thomson 2006 180). Disabled people spend a great deal of their time being aware that they stand out. Their keen sense of being scrutinized develops each time they venture into public.

"The second element in this process is to decide how to oversee the dynamics of the stare itself when it inevitably comes one's way" (Garland-Thomson 2006 180). The disabled actor has decided to oversee the dynamics of these stares by voluntarily presenting himself onstage. Where the DisAbility Project and Phamaly differ is in how they approached Garland-Thomson's third step of the process. "The third element is literally manipulating the eyes of the starer. One evaluates when to turn away, stare back, or further extend the stare. Sometimes it is best to allow the staring to go on in order for the starer to get a good look" (Garland-Thomson 2006 180). The DisAbility Project manipulates their starers through techniques Boal described in *Theatre of the Oppressed*. Alternately, Phamaly manipulates their starers by presenting traditional theater in a manner that alienates the audience in a Brechtian sense.

The final step in dealing with being stared at is to use the stare as an opening for dialogue. "Finally, the staree can and must enlist conversation to direct the staring process" (Garland-Thomson 2006 180). Phamaly passively leaves this step to the audience, whereas this step is central to how the DisAbility Project works.

In a Phamaly production, there can be moments where the performers' disabilities (whether intentionally or incidentally) add value to the audience's experience through a form of what Bertolt Brecht called the "alienation effect." The DisAbility Project approaches their

disabilities differently; they are up front with the audience that their experience is meant to be dialogic and they overtly draw attention to their agenda of disability advocacy through Boal's theater of the oppressed. In the following pages, I will discuss which aspects of the alienation effect I am interested in, then examine how watching disabled performers can help us to understand it. Secondly, I will discuss the aspects of the DisAbility Project that are rooted in Boal's theories. Finally I will discuss how perceptions of disabled actors onstage are rooted in assumptions about disability.

ON ALIENATION AND EMPATHY

As described by Brecht, the alienation effect works in opposition to traditional notions of empathy with and immersion within a theatricalized story. Nineteenth century literary critic Samuel Taylor Coleridge described how an audience allows itself to become immersed in a fictional world in his book *Biographia Literaria*. Prefessor Jim Ferris, chair of the Disabilities Studies Program at the University of Toledo, writes that "Coleridge contended that the pleasure we derive from theatrical performances is based on their unreal and fictitious nature" (Ferris 2005 67). In order to empathize with a story, an audience must accept that the unreal has become real, a phenomenon which Coleridge referred to as the willing suspension of disbelief. He described the willing suspension of disbelief as necessary for an audience to justify and accept fantastic or non-realistic elements in literature (Coleridge 1817). To facilitate the audience's suspension of disbelief, Western naturalistic acting is predicated upon the actor immersing himself fully in the reality of the character which he portrays. The actor uses all of his energy to transform himself into the character which he is portraying. This creates a reality onstage that audience members passively observe and imaginatively enter, with which they

empathize.

In order to mitigate the numbing effect of these empathetic feelings, Brecht wished to "alienate" the audience from the characters and the action of the play, thus forcing them to observe without empathizing or psychologically identifying with the characters. Instead, he wished the audience to understand intellectually his characters' dilemmas. To achieve such distancing, Brecht called for the alienation effect "which prevents the audience from losing itself passively and completely in the character created by the actor, and which consequently leads the audience to be a consciously critical observer" (Brecht 1957 91).

To produce this effect, the actor must "discard whatever means he has learnt of getting the audience to identify itself with the characters which he plays" (Brecht 1957 193), a goal supported by other Brechtian techniques such as breaking the fourth wall, direct address to the audience, or an actor's commentary on the action of the play. The alienation effect dictates that the "artist never acts as if there were a fourth wall besides the three surrounding him [...] At no moment must he go so far as to be wholly transformed into the character played" (Brecht 1957 193). Ironically, a disabled actor can have the opposite effect. The more fully Phamaly's actors immerse themselves in their characters, the more alienating it is for the audience. The actor's disability creates an alienating distance no matter how naturalistically he or she plays the role. This happens in part because Phamaly productions deliberately point out disability in the course of performance, e.g. casting a seeing-eye dog as Toto in *The Wiz*. Foregrounding disability in this way functions to separate actor from character in the audience's imagination. Phamaly productions differ from typical productions not only because they create a dialogue between actor and character but also because they create a dialogue between actor/character and spectator which serves to underscore the theme of the actors' and the audience's vulnerability to accident,

disease, and death. Phamaly challenges the audience to engage in the play and consider the lives of the actors in a way that a typical theatre company does not. By consequence of this engagement, Phamaly creates a Brechtian alienation which forces the audience to reconsider "what everybody knows" about people with disabilities and the perceived dangers that accompany disability.

The alienation caused by the examples in Chapter 2 is rooted in how disability is viewed and the discomfort that disability causes nondisabled people to feel. Disability studies theorist Harlan Hahn describes two kinds of discomfort that non-disabled people feel around people with disabilities: existential anxiety and aesthetic anxiety. "Existential anxiety refers to the perceived threat that a disability could interfere with functional capacities thought necessary for a satisfactory life" (Hahn 1988 43). "Aesthetic anxiety refers to fears of bodily difference, reflected in a propensity to shun those with unattractive bodily attributes" (Hahn 1988 42). The discomfort that audiences viewing a Phamaly production feel is rooted in Hahn's notion of "existential anxiety." The audience perceives that the disabilities of the actors could interfere with the capacities of the actors to satisfactorily perform the scene they are engaged in. The tears that the audience shed for the paraplegic out of her wheelchair, and the concern about the safety of the blind actor riding a bicycle were rooted in the anxiety that the audience feels about the functional capacities of the actors, thereby creating an alienating effect in spite of the naturalistic style of performance.

Even though the disabled actors felt (and indeed were) perfectly safe in the roles they were performing, the audience felt this anxiety because of their stereotypes and assumptions about disability. The rigorous rehearsal process that any theatre company goes through had turned these scenes into mundane experiences for the actors but not for the audience. Carrie

Sandahl, Associate Professor in the Department of Disability and Human Development at the University of Illinois at Chicago and formerly in the School of Theatre at Florida State University writes that,"Despite the fact that disability is a ubiquitous, even mundane, human experience, people with visible impairments almost always seem to 'cause a commotion' in public spaces…. The curious fight the urge to stare, to gather visual information that will help make sense of such startling physical difference" (Sandahl 2005 2). In these Phamaly productions, the actors "caused a commotion" and created in the audience a curious "urge to stare" though they were simply following the script. It seems that most people fight the urge to stare at disabled people out of concern for "not wanting to be rude." However, the disabled person onstage is ready, willing, and able to be stared at – indeed they are welcoming of it. The very nature of theatre is dependent upon causing a commotion in order to invite an audience to stare.

According to Brecht, feeling alienated, "the audience can no longer have the illusion of being the unseen spectator at an event which is really taking place" (Brecht 1957 91). When the audience realizes that these disabled actors are acting in unfamiliar ways, the audience becomes aware that the actor – and not necessarily the character – has a disability and that the actor and character are in fact separate figures. The audience is reminded that they are not unseen spectators and that this event is not really taking place. According to Ferris, this is because "disability obscures the blurry lines that separate fiction and art from real life" (Ferris 2005 56). The alienation effect blurs the lines between art and reality and so does disability itself.

MANAGING DISABILITY AND THEATER OF THE OPPRESSED

There is something Brechtian about the work of the DisAbility Project. They

certainly invite the audience to become aware that they are watching a performance, not real life. In the piece in which the actors play as if they are audience members "they have an argument about disability and what constitutes it. It's very, very funny and it's almost shocking in its humor and if it works it should completely disarm the audience. It's very Brechtian" (Lipkin interview 2012). Brechtian alienation is important to Lipkin. But the company expects the audience to be willing to engage in the performance in a manner that encourages them to critically discuss what they are viewing and to take this new knowledge with them when they leave the theater. Because of this, I contend that they have taken the theories of Brecht and have incorporated the techniques of Boal into their work.

Central to Boal's ideals is that theater must take on new forms, so that the audience is not entirely at the mercy of the performance and its practitioners' opinions and agendas. This is one aspect of the oppression that his theater sought to combat. He wished to free spectators from the oppression of performers; instead of having an audience passively watch and accept what was occurring before them, he wished to have them participate in shaping the outcome. Boal argued that we must tear down the wall between audience and actor. When this is done, spectators become engaged in the theatrical outcome and practice taking the risks involved in political action outside the theater. Boal described this as rehearsing for the revolution.

According to Boal, theater began as a practice of the people when they came together to chant and dance. Thespis changed this populist structure when he stepped out of the chorus and aristocratized the institution of theater by separating himself from the people. This setup created the conditions for an Aristotelian manipulation of the spectators. By being separate from the onstage action and experiencing catharsis, the spectator is asked to empathize with the character and accept the moral judgments of the play. Thus, theatre oppresses the audience by telling them

the proper way to think.

To counteract this oppression, Boal sought new theatrical forms. The Aristotelian model has changed little over the past three millennia, and Boal believed that this restricted the potential of theater for social upheaval. "Aristotle constructs the first, extremely powerful poetic-political system for intimidation of the spectator, for elimination of the 'bad' or illegal tendencies of the audience. This system is, to this day, fully utilized in conventional theater. But, obviously, the Aristotelian theater is not the only form of theater (Boal 1979 xiv).

The DisAbility Project does not attempt to intimidate the spectator into changing what they are doing "wrong." As actress Ana Jennings stated, the goal of the project is not to tell the audience how the world should be, but rather to ask the members of the audience if they would be happy with lack of access, lack of employment, and unfriendly stares often frequented upon disabled individuals. The company avoids using theater in a form in which actors present their vision of "truth" to a passive audience watching from an auditorium. When the company unites the physical space, the theme of the show, and the audience itself (such as in the example from Chapter 3 which took place in an art museum), they invite the spectators to interact with their environment and with disabled people in a manner they may have never done before.

The audience is compelled to humanize the performers, to see people with relatively atypical bodies as normal and to lose their anxiety about interaction with such people. This change in the audience's perspective acts upon the other form of anxiety described by Harlan Hahn: "Aesthetic anxiety refers to fears of bodily difference, reflected in a propensity to shun those with unattractive bodily attributes" (Hahn 1988 42). The audience members at a DisAbility Project show are encouraged to talk to, ask questions of, and sometimes even make a physical connection with the bodies of disabled people. Hopefully this activity allays their fear

of bodily difference and counteracts their propensity to shun.

The DisAbility Project's Boalian techniques encourage the audience to think of the actors as "disabled *people*" instead of just as "disabled." Lipkin says that the company wants

> the audience to be aware of the disabilities. Particularly because the pieces are layered on these disabled bodies. But what we want to do is expand the vision of how they see us. So that the audience thinks, "They are disabled, AND…." For example, Anna has a spinal cord injury, AND she is married, AND lives in her own home, AND has a Masters degree, AND drives. So it is the "and" that we are after; it is not the erasure of disability, it is adding something. (Lipkin interview 2012, her emphasis)

OUTSIDE PERCEPTIONS OF DISABILITY BROUGHT INTO THE THEATER

Certainly, an audience's experiences from outside the theatre inform its perceptions of what occurs within the world of the play. This is equally true when disability is part of the performance. Jim Ferris writes that, "When audiences enter the theatre, we cannot expect them to leave behind their own experiences of disability in the world" (Ferris 2005 59). The existential anxiety that nondisabled people feel for disabled people outside the theatre is brought into the theatre for a Phamaly performance along with everything else. Thus, specific "heightened moments" like those described above prevent the audience from becoming fully immersed in the fiction of the play they are watching. But, "awareness of fictionality is an essential component of aesthetic distance, a concept that provides some explanation for how we know the difference between what happens on the stage, for example, and real life" (Ferris 2005 56). On the other hand, the aesthetic anxiety that audiences feel when observing the DisAbility Project is also brought into the theater, and audiences must directly confront bodily difference or

the unattractive bodily attributes of the actors because the group seeks to minimize the aesthetic distance of the spectators. The DisAbility Project is not as concerned with creating a fiction for the audience to immerse themselves in. The performers overtly address issues and ask the audience to discuss why aspects of the performance event might have made them feel uncomfortable. For both companies, when audiences are made aware of the actors' disabilities, the fictionality of what is occurring onstage is broken along with the accompanying aesthetic distance. What is happening onstage in the play becomes blurred with what is happening in the real life of the disabled actor.

Once this blurring occurs, the audience is unsure how they should emotionally engage with the work. Should they engage emotionally with the actor or with the character? According to Ferris, "Once audience members accept the fictionality of the work, they feel 'emotionally cushioned and safe,' which is thought to give them freedom to engage emotionally with the work" (Ferris 2005 58). The audience is invited to stare at actors in both companies in order to better comprehend the nature of disability. At a Phamaly show, the audience members no longer feel "cushioned and safe" and they begin to empathize with the actor as much as they do with the character. At a DisAbility Project performance, the audience is asked to engage directly with the performers, blurring the lines between what happens inside the theater space and what is taken back into the real world. In watching a Phamaly production, audience members experience a dialogue between actor and character that is absent from typical productions of a play; watching the DisAbility Project the spectators engage in actual conversation with the performers and learn that the problems that disabled people face are more than mere dramatic interpretations. The lines between actor/character, between empathy/alienation, and between theater/reality become blurred as the audience loses the safety that comes from emotional cushioning of their anxieties

regarding disability.

This concern for the actors themselves results from how disability is viewed in the real world. According to Carrie Sandahl, "The social-construction model [of disability] locates disability within a society built for nondisabled people. Disability is a disjuncture between the body and the environment. It is the stairway in front of the wheelchair user, or making text in front of the blind person, that handicaps an individual, not the physical impairment itself" (Sandahl 2005 8). While the outside world may impair the functionality of a disabled person, the stage upon which the disabled actor works in the theatre is necessarily designed to allow that actor to function fully. Onstage, the disjunctures between the body and the environment are minimized through rehearsal repetitions in a specially designed space. Applying the social-construction model of disability to the stage suggests that the audience's alienation is not caused by the physical impairment itself but rather by the audience's expectations concerning that impairment. The audience expects that there *should* be a disjuncture between the actor's body and the actor's environment. Although the actor is fully integrated into the environment, the audience is anxious about his or her physical well being which creates an alienation effect no matter the actor's skill at naturalistically portraying the character.

As the audience considers what is practical and what is real onstage, what is art and what is real life, they are forced to reconsider their expectations about disabled people's abilities. "The distances between the practical and the aesthetic, between art and reality, between the work and the performer, [are] all jumbled by the clash between cultural expectations for disabled people in the world outside the theatre and those established inside" (Ferris 2005 59). In Phamaly shows, the cultural expectations which have been previously established outside the theatre for disabled people are not always carried over into the theatre. In DisAbility Project shows, audiences must

abandon their cultural expectation that it is wrong to stare at disabled people and interact with them as equals. Clear separations between art and reality, between actor and character, between disability caused by environment and disability caused by physical impairment become jumbled.

These two theater companies challenge the audience to reconsider what they "know" about disability. The audience is removed from the fictionality of the work by the assumptions they bring into the theater from outside. Even though Phamaly's plays are presented with a commitment to naturalistic characterization, the audience is nonetheless alienated. The DisAbility Project deliberately tries to alienate the audience through non-Aristotelian forms, so that they are compelled into interacting according to terms outlined by Boal. According to Petra Kuppers, Associate Professor of English at the University of Michigan, "The Brechtian tradition relies on alienation techniques to distance audiences from identificatory or 'knowledgeable' relation with the performers, from the established modes of seeing and knowing that developed in the safe zone of naturalist theatre" (Kuppers 2003 69). In the examples provided above, audience members were no longer able to clearly identify what they knew about the performers. The conventions of naturalism are at odds with Brechtian alienation. The DisAbility Project takes the added Boalian step of receiving input from the audience in real-time. The audience is forced to see disability no longer as a traditional stage metaphor. Rather, the actors' disabilities are placed into the realm of reality – both the limited reality presented onstage and the reality of the real world.

When these companies of disabled actors present themselves onstage, the structures of the theater become exposed so that the audience can participate in fomenting social change. "In Brecht's theatre, alienation techniques are used in order to allow structures to become visible, to undermine the 'common sense,' the 'natural,' or 'what everybody knows.' Instead of presenting

certainties onstage, the audience is challenged, questioned, seduced into engaging in a play of difference" (Kuppers 2003 50). In presenting traditional theatre in a nontraditional way and in rescripting modes of theatricality, Phamaly and the DisAbility Project ask the audience to engage in the play and to reconsider "what everybody knows" about people with disabilities. The stare of the audience is manipulated so that they must engage with the uncertainties presented to them. Both companies have effectively learned to manage the stare of the audience so that the entire process can become an engaged act between actor and spectator, rather than an act of detached gawking. These companies' productions differ from typical productions, not only because they create a dialogue between actor and character but also because they create a dialogue between actor/character and spectator that challenges assumptions about our vulnerability to accident, disease, and death.

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